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ABSTRACT

Following a brief description of the role of the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) as a provider of bibliographic control over the fugitive research and development literature in education, this paper reports on a number of studies evaluating various aspects of the effectiveness of the ERIC system. The function of ERIC as a vehicle for information dissemination is discussed, and a series of National Institute of Education studies which explored the extent to which Federal support of ERIC has fostered general purpose information dissemination in education are reviewed. Highlights and summaries of the findings are provided for the ERIC Acquisition and Selection Study, a study on Project Policy Options for Information Systems of the Future, and the ERIC Cost and Usage Study, and a forthcoming study on The Use of ERIC Resources by Information Service Providers is described. (JL)

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ERIC As a Resource for Improving Education: How is it Doing?

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"ERIC As A Resource for Improving Education: How is it Doing?"

Overview

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) program was begun in 1966 by the HEW's Office of Education to provide bibliographic control over and access to "fugitive" R & D literature in education. The need for a program like ERIC had resulted from the growing number of reports being produced by Federally supported studies and projects. In addition to an increasing volume of materials, the nature of many reports excluded them from traditional publishing and dissemination channels--e.g., as monographs, journals articles, conference papers.

Since its creation, the ERIC program has matured to become an information system that identifies, abstracts, indexes, announces, reports, and provides access to information about some 40,000 new education reports and journal articles annually. To do this, the ERIC program supports the development of information resources by a network of 16 ERIC Clearinghouses and a central processing facility. Under contract to the government, these organizations produce two monthly announcement journals (RIE and CIJE), develop the ERIC microfiche collection and computer searchable ERIC Tapes; produce special bibliographies, summaries, and syntheses; and provide a

host of special training activities and user services.

While the original emphasis of the ERIC program was that of bringing a growing body of education report literature under bibliographic control, its utility for information dissemination was soon recognized.

ERIC As a Dissemination Strategy

In a paper recently prepared for the NIE's National Council on Educational Research (NCER), Ward Mason explained that education currently employs three major dissemination strategies, that ERIC is a service oriented general purpose dissemination strategy, and that a characteristic common to general purpose strategies is that their activities tend to be driven by the needs of users. These general purpose strategies are distinct from strategies that are driven by the substantive nature of an innovation (focused dissemination initiatives) and strategies that embrace local problem solving and knowledge use within an operating system (organizational renewal and professional growth initiatives).

As a service oriented general purpose dissemination strategy, ERIC is characterized by three unique features. First, ERIC consists of information resources, primarily print materials, that are designed to be used by traditional information service providing organizations (e.g.,libraries, clearinghouses, intermediate service agencies, associations) and their clients. Second, ERIC characterizes a dissemination strategy that relies upon extensive non-Federal support. For instance, the Federal government

supports the development of ERIC resources but relies upon others to assume a much larger financial burden, that of providing ERIC based information services to clients throughout the United States. Third, the systemic nature of ERIC is natural rather than planned. That is, the degree to which ERIC is a national system made up of service providers who exchange information, refer clients, follow common standards, and generally support the development and use of ERIC resources is the result of voluntary cross-level and cross-sector collaboration and not central planning or management by the Federal government.

ERIC Studies

In 1968 the National Institute of Education began a series of studies of the ERIC program. These studies are concerned with both the design and performance of the Federally supported ERIC program and the degree to which Federal support of this program has fostered effective general purpose information dissemination in education. Thus, we are concerned with examining both the performance of a Federal program that supports the development of information resources and improving our understanding of the role those resources ultimately play in meeting educational information needs in the United States. The remainder of this paper provides some insights into what our studies to date reveal about the design and performance of the ERIC program and the utility of the resources it provides. Since our studies have focused on documenting and explaining ERIC rather than judging its worth; this paper presents selected findings, rather than conclusions, about three important ERIC research/evaluation questions.

How effectively does the ERIC program capture the fugitive literature in education and develop information resources that serve the needs of information service providers and their clients?

Both the design of the ERIC program and its information resources are more than a decade old, therefore, it is reasonable to question continued support for a decentralized system and print-based bibliographic resources. Regarding the former, the ERIC program continues to gather information and build information resources by supporting a network of 16 ERIC Clearinghouses while other resource developers have found success with centralized operations.

The issue of maintaining a decentralized ERIC information processing/resource development system was examined in the ERIC Acquisition and Selection Study. Using a case study methodology to gather, synthesize, and report both quanitative and qualitative data about each ERIC Clearinghouse, the contractor's report suggested the following.

- o The ERIC Clearinghouses maintain formal and informal linkages with their knowledge producing communities, thus, making report collection a reasonably orderly task.
- o ERIC Clearinghouses, in the main, collect and review most of the fugitive literature in their respective scope areas. Those Clearinghouses that don't capture "near 100%" of the fugitive literature in their scope are probably already working near capacity.
- o There don't seem to be any major knowledge producing communities that are excluded from ERIC consideration. Where fugitive literature is not reaching ERIC, it is most likely produced by individuals or groups outside or on the fringes of more formal knowledge producing communities.
- o Only about half of the materials reviewed annually by the ERIC Clearinghouses are obtained through formal arrangements with knowledge producers, the remainder are unsolicited submissions to ERIC. Unsolicited materials are the result of ERIC advertising programs and increased awareness of the system. It appears that the amount (percentage) of unsolicited materials being submitted to ERIC is increasing.

- o The ERIC Clearinghouses maintain staffs of professionals who objectively review materials submitted for selection. In many instances, the Clearinghouses use advisory committee members or professionals outside the "system" to review materials. Many reviews are conducted at no cost to the Federal government.

- o The ERIC Clearinghouses lever substantial resources from their advisory boards and their parent organizations (institutions of higher education and professional associations) and from professional colleagues. This results in considerable cost saving to the Federal government.

- o There is some variability in both standards and volume of work across Clearinghouses.

- o Level funding and/or reductions in budget significantly reduce the Clearinghouse's abilities to seek out individual authors/ articles or to revise materials so that they will be suitable for inclusion in ERIC.

The second part of our question, dealing with the design of ERIC resources, has been addressed both in formal studies and through NIE's planning and program review work. There have been no indications to date that ERIC would benefit substantially from either changing its existing resources or adding any new products. This conclusion is based on the following recognitions: 1) there is currently substantial distribution and use of all ERIC resources, 2) ERIC resources are continually refined and improved, 3) there is no substantial evidence that any ERIC resources is not obtained or used because of its design, and 4) ERIC has stayed on the "cutting edge" of new technology utilization.

Perhaps the best extant review of ERIC's current resources was the study Project Policy Options for Information Systems of the Future. The modified Delphi study synthesized the opinions of people from the research, information service providing, and information use communities to suggest improvements for information systems like ERIC. Two conclusions

drawn from the study help illustrate the acceptability of existing ERIC resources.

- o While participants recognized that many information seekers have difficulty using resources like ERIC, they did not suggest altering these resources to suit the needs of consumers. Rather, they suggested that ERIC be viewed as part of a larger "dissemination type system" that provides linkage and intepretive services. Resources that are of use to the greatest number of consumers are things like ERIC's Information Analysis Products: bibliographies, summaries, syntheses, etc.

- o High technology information resources (e.g., video discs, mini-computers) were viewed as offering better information storage, retrieval, and distribution opportunities, but not as near future replacements for current ERIC resources. The participants agreed that new technologies should be studied, but suggested that they offered no immediate advantages over present resources and methods for serving clients.

What have been the effects of Federal policies that rely upon others to obtain ERIC resources and provide ERIC services?

Since ERIC's inception the Federal government has supported the development of ERIC resources and relied on members of the education and information service providing communities to obtain these resources and use them to serve their various clients. Thus, ERIC resources are available primarily at locations where service providers have chosen to obtain them. Similarly, the degree to which a national "ERIC System" exists reflects the willingness of information service providers to work collaboratively to support such an entity. Today, there is ample evidence that Federal policies have fostered (or at least not inhibited) the development of one of the largest and most widely used information systems in the world. Data from the ERIC Cost & Usage Study shows that ERIC resources are available throughout the United States, that ERIC information service

providers collaborate and think of themselves as part of the "ERIC System", and that these same ERIC information providers contribute significant financial resources to the support of ERIC. Some study findings that illustrate how ERIC has prospered with limited Federal support and management are as follows.

- o ERIC information is available at an estimated 3,269 different locations throughout the United States. Just over half of these ERIC Access Points are located at institutions of higher education and another 25% are libraries and information service providing organizations that exist to serve elementary and secondary education. Only 17 Access Points are supported by NIE's ERIC Program.
- o ERIC Access Points spend approximately $26 million annually to support the distribution and use of ERIC information, or about four times as much as is contributed by the Federal government.
- o Nearly half of the 3,269 ERIC Access Points in the United States receive their primary support from college and university budgets; another 33.4% are supported by state and local funds; and 6.2% are supported by Federal grants and contracts.

How effectively are ERIC resources serving the educational information needs of people in the United States?

The real test of ERIC for those interested in information dissemination is whether or not the system meets the needs of its intended clients. Here we must admit that our research is not yet complete. Data from the ERIC Cost & Usage Study demonstrates that ERIC resources are used extensively by all sectors of the education practice community. In addition, data gathered thus far suggests that clients are very satisfied with the information they obtain from ERIC. At the same time, the data we have is self-reported and has been gathered after-the-fact. A forthcoming study (The Use of ERIC Resources by Information Service Providers) will more closely

examine how clients use ERIC resources and the degrees to which the resulting information actually satisfies their needs. For the time being, however, we can point to several study results that indicate 1) ERIC is playing a major role in meeting the education information needs of persons in the United States, and 2) clients are willing to commit substantial resources (time and money) for the obtainment of ERIC information.

- o ERIC resources are used more than 2.7 million times annually, providing clients with more than 30 million bibliographic records and/or primary documents.
- o The two groups accounting for the most annual usages of ERIC resources are students at colleges and universities and persons whose primary responsibility is teaching, training, or counseling. These two groups account for 34.4% and 29%, respectively, of annual ERIC usages.
- o Sampling from a universe of 1.8 million persons employed in the educational community in the United States, study data indicate that 33.2% of these persons have used ERIC resources. More than 80% of those who have used ERIC are employed at the elementary or secondary school level.
- o School practitioners outside higher education now account for more than one third of annual ERIC usages while people whose primary job or school function is research/evaluation only account for about 3% of annual ERIC usages.
- o On the average, an hour of ERIC usage costs approximately $12.90. The NIE contributes about 53¢ to each hour of use, while access points contribute $2.50 and the client contributes $9.70.